

# Suggestions and Strategies for Helping Learners relate to Text

When thinking about how to relate Jewish text to learners, I believe that it is important to start from a social/ emotional place. It has seemed to be that the way to make Torah and other text accessible for learners is by thinking in terms of where they are developmentally speaking. We need to consider the issues and questions that they are raising for themselves and create outlets for them to express that. Very often engaging kids in informal methods of study helps them feel more connected and find personal meaning to the subject matter at hand. This guide should be used as a reference for considering different informal teaching methods that will help guide kids through difficult texts. In this guide there are a number of different strategies for helping learners construct their own meaning through asking questions, storytelling, art- both visual and performative and writing prompts. I have used a lot of these different methods in my classroom and find them to be extremely affective in helping kids create powerful and memorable learning experiences.

## **Putting this into Lomed Terms**

In order to create successful whole person learning in our classroom, and move beyond frontal learning, we must think of creative and powerful ways to help students be able to reach learner outcomes. However, it is crucial that you don't use these methods alone, but use them as a way to deepen understanding. There is a danger in thinking that these tools alone can provide insight and understanding. You must remember to follow up on these activities by asking the learner's to share their responses and see what they have gotten out of these activities. These different methods of learning, or "prompts" are ways of helping students reach learner outcomes and be able to "know the information", "do actions as a result of knowing the information", value what it is that they are learning, and feel sense of the larger Jewish community.

## **Helping Students Ask Questions**

If we are going to consider the learners point of view, then we must begin by having them ask their own questions concerning text. One of the most powerful learning techniques is self-questioning. When students are in charge of the questions, they take control of information and become active learners. Students must be taught to question themselves about their learning. Here are some ideas to help students ask questions

1. **Modeling Good Questions:** This is the first step in having learning realize what types of questions you are looking for. By asking students questions and informing them of what type of question this is and why it deepens meaning, the students will be more likely to ask these types of questions themselves.

2. **Prompts:** The way to begin question asking is by giving the learners prompts that will trigger background knowledge to help solidify new meaning and understanding.
3. **Brainstorm:** This is a way for students to freely ask questions about anything concerning the text. One way to do this is to give each one of them 5 minutes to write down all of the questions that they have. Another way to do this is to break them up into either pairs or small groups and together write a list of questions.
4. **Categorization:** Based on the list of brainstormed questions, together with the students help them decide which category of question asking they fall into. It is important for students to understand the different levels of asking questions. For example, is it a clarifying question that is in the text or is it an interpretative question that requires students to come up with their own answer and interpretations.

## Teachers asking Questions

When thinking about how to ask questions, it is important to think about the different types of questions we can ask the children. It is also important to build up to harder questions. Bloom Taxonomy is one of the first authors to come up with a systematic strategy for question asking. There are other authors who talk about the art of asking questions. One is H. Lynn Erickson and he talks about 3 types of questions as being factual, conceptual, and provocative.

1. **Factual questions** which are still the ones that are easily answered with definitive, and comparatively simple answers. These are the questions you find on the show Jeopardy. Think of these questions as confidence builders. They should be easy enough so they understand them.
2. **Conceptual questions** might be ones that are convergent, divergent, or evaluative in construction -- ones that delve deeper and require more sophisticated levels of cognitive processing and thinking. However, these are questions that can be found within the text. At this level, it is good to incorporate other translations and interpretations.
3. **Provocative questions** are ones that entice and ones cannot be answered with simple answers. They are questions that can be used to motivate and frame content or are essential questions. These are question that don't really necessarily have answers. They touch upon the emotional element of the text. In the initial categorization above they would be either complex divergent questions or more sophisticated combination questions like divergent/evaluative ones. Such as "why do you think that Abraham left his home", or "How did you feel when Abraham chose to offer his son

### **What to do with silence?**

If students are silent after you ask a question, don't rush in with answers. If the question was insightful, students will have to consider it for a few moments. The best advice I was ever given about asking questions was to wait until I had counted to 25 silently before jumping in to rephrase it.

Most classes have two or three people who don't participate in a discussion. If you think it's appropriate, ask those quiet students, "Dennis, how do you feel about this? I'd like to hear your ideas."

Quieter students find it easier to talk if given graduated, multiple choice answers. To the question, "How would you have felt if you were Isaac?" offer these possibilities: not upset, mildly upset, very upset. With excessively quiet students, try asking students to tell their answers to the person next to them first; then, ask everyone to report that same answer to a small group or the class. This gives shy students a chance to think about and rehearse their answer on another person before attempting to report to the class.

Before asking a question that requires participants to be vulnerable, you might confess your own shortcomings: "I yelled at my kids this week when they spilled juice on the carpet. What makes you angry?"

There are a number of educational methods to help children engage with text, to help deepen understanding, and form personal connection. These methods touch upon different learning styles. In terms of Lomed language, these can be considered different "prompts" to help reach learner outcomes. Before considering what methods of informal engagement you are interested in using, you must consider what is your end result or "big idea" that you are trying to achieve? These methods are tools to help you reach that big idea.

### **Incorporating Storytelling:**

Storytelling is the oldest form of education. Cultures have always told tales as a way of passing down beliefs, traditions, and history to future generations. Stories are at the core of all that makes us human. Stories are the way we store information in the brain. A list of facts will be forgotten, but stories are remembered. Stories help us to organize information, and tie content together. Stories go straight to the heart. Because students are emotionally involved and truly enjoy storytelling, it can help to create a positive attitude toward the learning process. There is a difference between telling and reading. Without the book as a barrier, the teller looks directly into the eyes of the audience and is free to use gestures, facial expression, and body movements to enhance the telling and help children understand the story better. The reader sees only the words on the page, while the storyteller sees the wonder and

excitement on the faces of the listeners. Listening to stories instills the love of language in children and motivates them to read. 6. Storytelling stimulates the imagination. Scientist Albert Einstein said that "imagination is more important than knowledge." Stories teach lessons. Stories are excellent tools for teaching about desirable behaviors and strengthening character. Storytelling develops listening skills. Storytelling helps students develop concentration, and the pure pleasure that they experience while listening to a story helps them to associate listening with enjoyment.



1. **Retelling the story in your own words-** This is a way to help the children create their own version and relationship to the story. By retelling a story in your own words you are automatically forming your own connection and interpretation of the story. It also takes the words away from the written text and makes it more into a story.
2. **Put Yourself in their shoes-** This is a way to consider yourself as a Biblical figure. It is easier to examine something from outside of the story, but once you become the character, and use "I" language, then it puts more weight onto each decision. For example, "I really was hurt when my father Abraham offered me as a sacrifice. I can't believe that he would do that."
3. **Retell the story from a different character's perspective** – This form of storytelling is still staying within the story and time period of the text, but moving to another characters voice.
4. **Become inanimate objects from a story and tell their story;** Moses's shoes. How does it feel for Moses to be walking in you? "How did you feel when Moses took you off before going to the burning bush?"

## Art Activities

Teaching text through the arts is away for kids to engage in processing and learning information differently. Teaching through the arts helps students experience concepts rather than simply discussing or reading about them. For example, they might draw a picture, write a poem, act in a drama, or compose music to further their understandings of concepts in specific content areas. This approach is consistent with educational theories that highlight the importance of reaching multiple learning styles or intelligences. Using the arts is also a great tool to draw out information from the more quiet students. Students who have trouble expressing them verbally often find it easier to use visual arts as a form of communication. As well, the kids who have a lot to say, but often have trouble articulating their thoughts do well when they are asked to take time to write down what they are thinking in the form of a poem or creative writing piece.



### Visual Art Activities

1. **Paper Midrash-** A paper Midrash is an expression of text using art materials. Traditionally we have used written midrash to fill in the blanks in the text or to extend it's meaning. Visual Midrash opens up another route to interpretation and understanding, and allows our learners to use different parts of their multiple intelligences or learning styles. In paper Midrash kids tell a story from the torah by using only construction paper and glue. They tear construction paper and glue it onto a blank piece to make their own visual representation of the story. This works well because it doesn't matter if kids have artistic talent, because everyone is working with the same limited materials.

2. **Mask Making-** This is a great way for learners to share their own feelings and display reactions to a given text. For example, "How did you feel when Moses came down from Mount Sinai and broke the tablets?" The children can then make a mask demonstrating their emotions.

3. **Mural:** As a class the learners can create a mural using paints, magazine, words, etc to demonstrate response to text.

4. **Photography:** This is a great tool for the students to capture sentiments. For example, if you are exploring different names for God, try handing out cameras to students to go outside of the classroom and capture objects and scenes that represent the different names for God.

### **Language Arts**

**Using Poetry:** Using poetry helps students explore important issues in a content area, issues that extend beyond the classroom into their lives, communities, and the world. It's this stepping beyond the facts — making connections, analyzing information, and creating new understandings — that enables students to “get into” your subject and see its relevance to their lives and their world.

**Writing Poetry:** This is a way for students to express their feelings regarding text in the form of a poem. If you would like them to be shorter poems, use haiku style poetry, if you would like to it rhyme you can use a limerick.

**Writing prompts/reflective writing:** Writing prompts are phrases or questions to help kids reflect on a given idea or text. They are usually given a specific amount of time that they have to write their responses. As well, some teachers tell them that they can't stop writing and can't put down their pencils. For example, “Describe one time when you were brave like Jacob”, or “I was scared when...”

**Writing Songs:** Have the students make up songs to familiar pop music tunes. This is a great way for them to use what they know and add their own twist. After they have written the songs, make sure that they have a chance to present them to each other.

**Word Wall:** This is a piece of paper up in the classroom for kids to come up and write words or phrases as an initial response to text.

**Note cards:** A way to begin conversation is by handing out note cards with either words or phrases from the text to each kid. You then go around the room and ask each person to reflect on what is written on their note card.